


Key Factors to Successful Community Development: The Korean Experience

著者	Choe Chang Soo
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**Key Factors to Successful
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Chang Soo Choe, Ph.D. *

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Abstract

The Saemaul Undong of the Republic of Korea has been world-widely recognized as a successful model of rural community development. The Saemaul Undong was a pure Korean way of community development program which was initiated by the political will of the top national leadership in order to escape from poverty. There are several key factors to the success of the Saemaul Undong. First, the national government's guidance and support for the movement played a very important role in the whole period of the movement. Second, there was a wide range of people's participation in the implementation process. Third, the Saemaul Undong could make a big success by nurturing community leadership which was selected by rural residents themselves. Finally, as a movement for the spiritual reform, the Saemaul Undong imbued the people with the spirits of diligence, the self-reliance, and cooperation.

Keywords: Rural Development, Saemaul Undong, Government Intervention

JEL classification: O20, O53, R58

* Associate Professor, School of Public Administration, Korea University
(cschoe@korea.ac.kr)

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INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPING ECONOMIES (IDE), JETRO
3-2-2, WAKABA, MIHAMA-KU, CHIBA-SHI
CHIBA 261-8545, JAPAN

I. Introduction

The Saemaul Undong, the Korean version of community development movement transformed Korea into one of the leading developing countries during the 1970's. It has been recognized as a successful model of community development project, especially for underdeveloped and developing countries. In fact, it was not only the rural community development project, but also the modernization project of Korea.

The Saemaul Undong, which was launched as a rural community development project at first, was expanded later in scope and program to urban sector, and became a nation-wide movement for nation building and economic prosperity. In this paper, however, the focus is on the Rural Saemaul Undong in the 1970s that contributed to the development of rural community in Korea.

The purpose of this paper is to find out key factors to the success of the Saemaul Undong as a rural community development project for drawing implications for other countries. In order to achieve the purpose of this study, the historical development of the Saemaul Undong is reviewed first and followed by description of its characteristics and major achievements. Role of government both national and local levels is worthwhile to be focused in order to fully understand the Saemaul Undong because the role of government was important throughout its whole period.

Finally, key factors to the success of the Saemaul Undong will be drawn.

II. Historical Development of the Saemaul Undong

The Saemaul Undong was initiated in the early 1970s to improve the living conditions of the residents of rural communities. The President Park Chung-Hee instructed at a national conference of governors and ministers of the central government to study ways and means to promote rural self-help efforts based on cooperation among farmers, government agencies concerned, and farm leaders.



Based on this instruction, the national government drew up an experimental project, named the Saemaul Undong. The national government issued working guidelines for “Ten Projects for Constructing Better Villages” as a pilot program. Guidelines were published in October 1970 and all the county mayors (appointed by the national government) received special instructions and a short training course on how to launch the projects. The pilot program was evaluated as very impressive by the national government. Based on this evaluation, the national government gave 335 bags of cement each to all rural villages in the country to improve farmers’ immediate living environments such as village piped water supply facilities, community laundry areas, common compost plots, etc. in early 1971. According to the statistics, the government provided \$ 8.5 million and the projects completed were worth \$ 25 million.



The development of the Saemaul Undong can be explained by 4 consecutive stages. First one is a Foundation Building stage. From 1971 to 1973, the Saemaul Undong focused on the improvement of the farmers’ immediate living environments. Included programs are replacements of straw-thatched roofs of traditional farming house with concrete slates or steel tins, widening and strengthening of in-roads or in-alleys, improvements of fences of farming

houses, and building foot-bridge. These projects did not immediately increase income, but they benefit the villagers themselves, and require some sacrifice and cooperation from everyone.

Foundation Building stage was followed by the so-called Self-Help Development stage. Having successfully completed the projects for the improvements of living environments, the villagers were encouraged to take up income-generating projects such as joint farming, common seedbeds, off-season vegetable cultivation, pig farming, pasturage, community forestation, building Saemaul factories and common marketing facilities.

The third stage of the Saemaul Undong focused on spiritual enlightenment of the rural people. As a matter of fact, the spiritual enlightenment program had been started since the beginning of the 2nd stage of the Saemaul Undong. However, the Spiritual enlightenment program in this period was aimed at inducing and internalizing the development will of the people based on innovative motivation. The program purported to infuse the “we can-do” spirit with three components of diligence, self-help, and cooperation.

The final stage of the development of the Saemaul Undong began in 1980, just after the President Park Chung-Hee was suddenly assassinated by one of his men. Under the administration of the successive government, the Saemaul Undong, which was previously under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Home Affairs during the 1970's, has been taken over by the government-affiliated private, administrative body, the National Council of Saemaul Undong. From then on, the activities of the Saemaul Undong have been transferred gradually from the direct control of governmental agencies to the hands of private organization and people. The privatization of the Saemaul Undong does not necessarily mean a complete separation from the government. Rather, it means a division of labor between the government and the private sector. It can be said, however, that the vitality of the Saemaul Undong had been decreased since the end of the 3rd stage due to the rapid economic development of the nation.

III. Characteristics of the Saemaul Undong and Its Achievements

1. Main Characteristics of the Saemaul Undong

The Saemaul Undong can be characterized with several features. First, it can be said that the Saemaul Undong was conducted by so-called integrated approach, that is a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches, although it started without a well-defined formal or theoretical framework at first. In fact, government officials themselves did plan and facilitate rural villagers in order to implement the Saemaul Undong without any support from academicians who might have had useful and related technical knowledge in its early stage. However, it does not mean that the Saemaul Undong had been projected with no framework. Recent studies show that the Saemaul Undong was conducted by a combination of top-down

and bottom-up approaches.

Second, the implementation strategy of the Saemaul Undong is a pure Korean way of community development. The mottoes, slogans, and terminology used for the program are based on the Korean way of thinking. It means that the implementation of the Saemaul Undong was based on the positive aspects of Korean culture and tradition.

Third, the most important intention to pursue the Saemaul Undong is to escape from poverty. At the time of the inception of the Saemaul Undong, there was a strong need to overcome a seasonal problem of hunger. Each year during the months of April through June many farm households suffered an extreme shortage of food. It is called “the barley hump.” Because poverty was a fact of life, the initiation of the Saemaul Undong means to challenge to this situation. The Saemaul Undong as a better-living movement emphasized diversification of income sources of farm households that were largely limited to rice production. As a result, the production of main grains (rice and barley) reached sufficiency by 1975. This was considered such an overwhelming achievement of the Saemaul Undong.

Fourth, the Saemaul Undong was, in a sense, a movement for spiritual reform of Korean people, and has achieved a lot in this respect. It changed people’s attitude from laziness to diligence, from dependence to self-reliance, and from individual selfishness to cooperation with others so as to be dubbed as “Social Revolution of Korean Rural Society.” The drive toward better cooperation was intended to restore Korea’s old tradition of Doo-re (a form of community savings and sharing union), Poomasie (a custom of farm-hand sharing among neighbors), and Hyang-yack (community codes of ethics and cooperation).

2. Achievements of the Saemaul Undong

Achievements of the Saemaul Undong in the 1970s have been well documented. The Table 1 shows the achievements of the major Saemaul Undong projects conducted in 1970s.

Table 1. Achievements of the Major Saemaul Projects in 1970s

Project Name	Unit	Objective	Performance	Growth
Expanding Village Roads	Km	26,266	43,558	166 %
Constructing New Agricultural Roads	Km	49,167	61,797	126
Installing Small Bridges	Unit	76,749	79,516	104
Constructing Village Centers	Unit	35,608	37,012	104
Building Warehouses	Unit	34,665	22,143	64
Housing Improvements	Unit	544,000	225,000	42
Improving Village Layout	Village		2,747	
Constructing Sewage Systems	Km	8,654	15,559	179
Supplying Electricity	Household	2,834,000	2,777,500	98
Operating Saemaul Factories	Unit	950	717	75

Source: National Council of Saemaul Undong (1999). *Saemul Undong in Korea*. p. 24

The Saemul Undong was very successful in developing rural economy of Korea. As shown in the Table 2, the income of rural households increased sharply in 1970s as a result of the several Saemaul Undong projects. It was possible by the introduction of modern agricultural technologies with the internalization of hard-working spirit among rural people.

Table 2. Farming Household Income in 1970s**(Unit: Korean Won)**

Year	Household Income	Agricultural Income		Non-agricultural Income	
		Amount	Ratio (%)	Amount	Ratio (%)
1970	255,800	194,000	75.9 %	61,800	24.1 %
1973	480,700	390,300	81.2	90,400	18.8
1976	1,156,300	921,200	79.7	235,100	20.3
1979	1,531,300	1,531,000	68.7	696,200	31.3

Source: National Council of Saemaul Undong (1999). *Saemul Undong in Korea*. p. 25.

For the period of Foundation Building stage, farming household income was increased from 255,800 Won (approximately \$243) to 480,700 Won (\$457). For the Self-help Development stage lasted for 3 years from 1974, farming household income increased to

1,156,300 Won (\$1,101) in 1976. In 1979, the last year of the third period (Achieving Self-support stage), rural household income reached to 2,227,500 Won (\$2,121). In sum, farming household income in Korea increased six times for 10 years.

IV. Role of Governments and Interaction with Rural People

As mentioned above, the Saemaul Undong was initiated by the political will of the top national leadership as a rural development project. Accordingly, both national government and local governments played important roles throughout the development of the Saemaul Undong.

First, the national government set up general plan for the Saemaul Undong based on community needs. As the 1971's program to cultivate better villages presented impressive results, the government saw the need for a more systematic approach to the drive. To guarantee effective rural development, the government set the general course for related projects and limited its assistance by providing minimum basic materials needed for the projects.

It provided incentives for communities showing excellent results after comprehensive evaluation projects, and used the results of evaluation for planning next projects. That is, at the initial stage, the government gave incentives for farmers to improve their own living environments including roofs, kitchens and toilets. Materials required were provided by the government, partly as grants and partly as loans.

The national government conducted a national survey in 1972 to secure basic data about the community and the need for socio-economic revitalization. All communities were classified into three categories on the basis of analyzing data; underdeveloped, developing, and developed communities. The strategy of community development in Saemaul Undong was a selective sequential approach for advancing every community to a higher degree of development. The community should meet the basic developmental requirements proposed by the government in order to be at a higher level with joint cooperative efforts between the realization of community will and government supports.

The national government also established Saemaul Undong coordinating committees, representing various sectors at the national, regional, and county levels. The National Committee, for example, consists of vice ministers of several ministries of the national government.

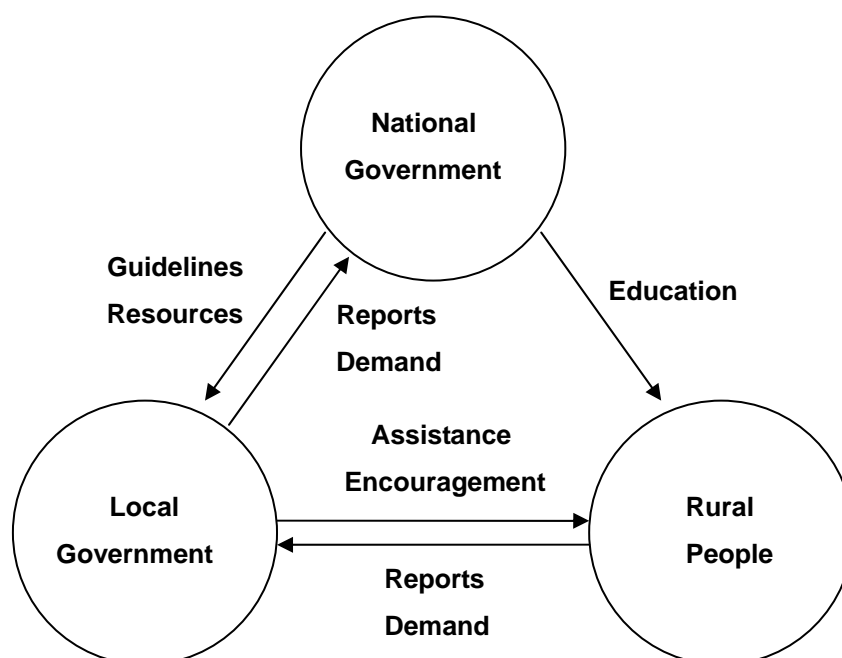
Second, local governments were also involved in conducting the Saemaul Projects. The role of public delivery system at the community level was also essential for the implementation of Saemaul Undong due to its control of local resources. The coordinating body of the public delivery system was always searching for any goal conflicts or unnecessary duplication in the process of actual implementation of changing agents at the community level, such as extension

workers, family planning workers, voluntary organizations and community leaders. Extension workers of local governments were checking the progress of projects and for guiding implementation of projects. They played a role of facilitators.

One of the significant strategies of the Saemaul Undong was a pooling of resources from the delivery organizations to provide efficient services in the wide range of activities undertaken in the communities. To increase the efficiency and efficacy of the project, officials of local governments frequently met with community leaders, and sometimes participated into the community meetings. This leads to increased managerial confidence of the government delivery services. The strong commitment of high credibility of local government was arranged so that each government official was assigned responsibility for the efficient implementation of the project. Hence each local official as a changing agent frequently visited the assigned villages to identify problems, to monitor progress of the project, to deliver proper services and to encourage villagers. The authority provided training and technical services to accelerate its efficiency.

Figure 1 describes the structure of interaction among national government, local government, and rural people in the process of the Saemaul Undong.

Figure 1. Structure of Interaction among NG, LG, and People



Third, there were three organizations at community level. As governmental assistance in providing essential supplies for the related project was inadequate, rural residents had to tackle the problem arising from limited resources.

These include neighborhood meeting composed of 20~25 families, general meeting of village which all residents participated into, and village development committee(VDC) composed of around 15 representatives of official and non-official village organizations.



There are two type of organization at the local community level through which the people can express their interests and needs. The first type of organization includes such gatherings as general meetings and neighborhood meetings in which all members of village can take part. General meetings (one per village) and neighborhood meetings (one per 20-25 families) represent the main groupings of people who wish to be directly involved in the activities of the village. The other organization is the Village Development Committee(VDC).

Since the right after the inception of the Saemaul Undong, Village Development Committee at Ri/Dong level (the lowest administrative unit) played an important role in making decisions at community level. This quasi-civil organization was composed of around 15 members each, including those representing official and non-official village structures such as mutual assistance organizations to preserve village forests, to revitalize agriculture, and to encourage residents to practice their love of their village. The chairperson of this organization was the Saemaul leader. The major demographic sectors including youth and women were represented in this committee along with agents for village security, auditing, credit union, and village library.

The main functions of Village Development Committee were to coordinate the activities of various functional residents organizations while discussing and deciding on Saemaul projects, and effectively implementing administrative policies. Some of the functions of the committee were to select suitable Saemaul projects and to devise related working plans; to carry out development projects with the cooperation of local residents; to store and manage resources

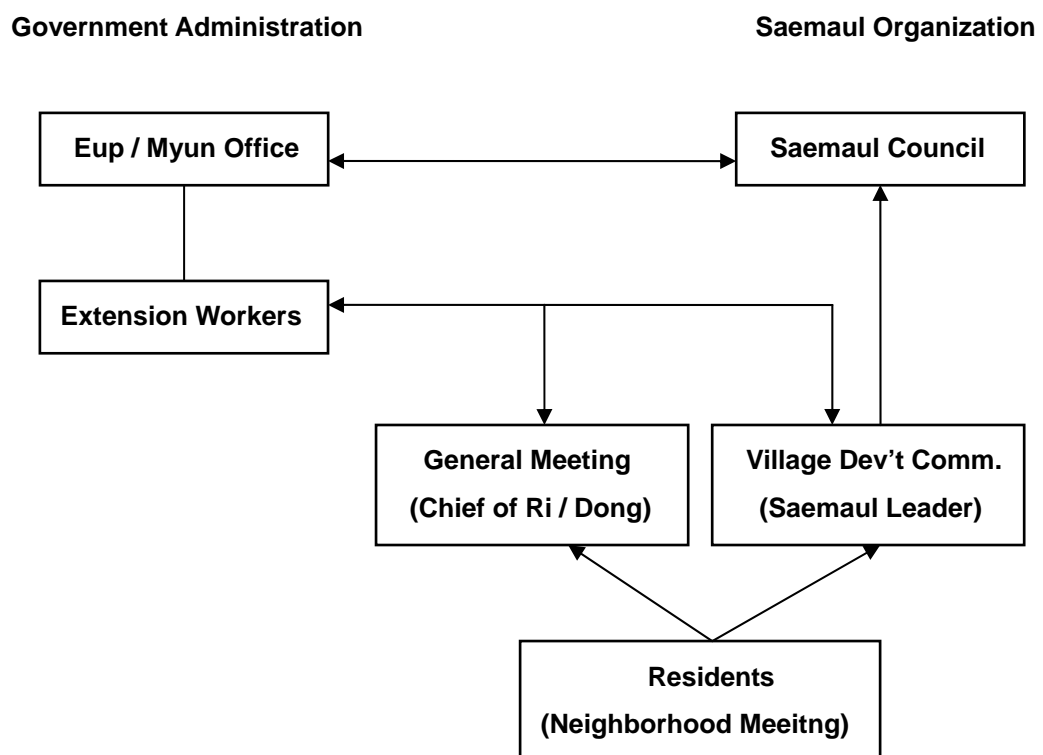
allotted by the government, and to maintain completed projects.

Therefore, it was the Village Development Committee at Ri/Dong level which was responsible for Saemaul Undong projects as an implementing unit. The procedure of implementing a project at Ri/Dong level begins with the general meetings of residents. The village residents discuss and finalize the details of their projects and report the results to either city or county authorities, and then the Village Development Committee at Ri/Dong carry out the details of the plan.

Prior to the actual implementation, the committee makes various preparations: raising as much of the necessary funds as the residents can afford; applying for and receiving external assistance in the forms of raw materials, money, and technology; and with the assistance of civil engineers or construction-related technicians of city or rural administration bodies, completing the plans for structures to be remodeled or built. Implementation of projects commences in earnest as soon as preparations are complete.

Figure 2 is an illustration of the Saemaul Undong system at local level, especially at community level.

Figure 2. Saemaul Undong System at Community Level



V. Key Factors to Success

As known well, the Saemaul Undong has been regarded as a successful community development movement and thereby many developing countries has studied its ways and key factors to success for applying their own cases. Key factors to the success of Saemaul Undong can be drawn as follows.

1. Government Intervention and Support

First, the Saemaul Undong was planned and conducted under the guidance of central organization. One of the most crucial forms of input into the Saemaul Undong is the package of government interventions and support. Since the inception of the Saemaul Undong, government support for it covers various kinds of services and assistance intended to introduce the system to communities.

2. Wide Range of People's Participation

Second, people's participation was one of the important factors of the success of the Saemaul Undong. There are some arguments over the nature of the Saemaul Undong. While some scholars describe that the Movement was implemented by top-down method, others see it as the one conducted by the combination of the top-down and bottom-up approaches. Recent studies show that the Saemaul Undong was a participatory means of promoting community development. It was an undertaking requiring the participation of the whole nation in planning, implementation and distribution of the benefits of the program. In order to achieve the original goal of the Saemaul Undong, it required massive consensus of collective value commitment toward community development endeavors. The popular participation in the movement was widespread in planning and implementing Saemaul projects.



3. Community Leadership

Third, the Saemaul Undong could make a big success by nurturing community leadership. Village leadership consisted of Saemaul leaders, both men and women, who had been selected by the villagers. The actual leadership was performed in collaboration with the village chief appointed by the township office. Village leaders selected by the villagers also played an important role as change agents disseminating technological innovation, and also as managers in planning and implementing projects. Leadership training was emphasized as the main thrust of the Saemaul Undong. Most Saemaul leaders' training program were organized under government sponsorship with a view to fostering leadership as well as inculcating the Saemaul philosophy. The leadership training methods are ① shared experience of trainees and staff members lodging together, ② cultivating of the Saemaul spirit through actual practice, ③ mutual learning through group discussion and presentation of case studies, and ④ follow-up services and support of the project for the graduates

The role of women in the Saemaul Undong had been quite extensive. In the process of the Saemaul Undong, the cooperation of women leaders in the community made possible the utilization of their talents in community action projects within the prevailing socio-cultural context. Realizing the potential of women as change agents in the society, the authority stimulated them and conducted leadership training for them at various training institutes. The role of women in the Saemaul Undong ranges from the mode of family life, savings initiated in the form of rice savings, communal kitchens, nutrition improvement projects and sanitary measures. Of course, they participated in the public deliberation and in the decision-making. Women's activities in Saemaul Undong included fund-raising campaigns, operating cooperative

shops, operating communal kitchens and daycare center.

Community leadership provided a ground for people to look for strong ties with others under the realization of “we-ness,” the latter made the Saemaul Undong cooperative efforts for joint development and joint progress (Kee-Ok Kim 1992). In fact, there was full participation in the Saemaul Undong among government officials, the rural elite, university professors, community schools, businessmen, voluntary organizations, and farmer’s organizations in different way of sharing values.

4. Spiritual Reform

The Saemaul Undong was, in a sense, a movement for spiritual reform of Korean people, and achieved a lot in this respect. It was a success in that it had changed people’s attitude from laziness to diligence, from dependence to self-reliance, and from individual selfishness to cooperation with others. The drive toward better cooperation was intended to restore Korea’s old tradition of Doo-re(a form of community savings and sharing union), Poomasie(a system of farm-hand sharing among neighbors), and Hyang-yack(community codes of ethics and cooperation).

Another important aspect of development in the Saemaul Undong was the acquisition by each community of a substantial amount of public funds and a considerable amount of savings. Each community accumulated village funds for self-governing projects. The Government incorporated this activity into the Saemaul Undong and placed it under the Credit Cooperative Act. The credit fund was to lead the Movement to cooperate and cooperative systems, aiming at prosperity. It was the principle of continuous development on the basis of shared responsibilities with mutual reinforcement of the spirit and the economy. The concept of sharing responsibilities for community development projects aimed at strengthening the neighborhood concept, collectivism, and solidarity, which also attempted to achieve economic prosperity through diligence, thrifty, saving and income increase.

VI. Conclusion: Implications for Other Countries

The Saemaul Undong was launched in the early 1970s as a Korean version rural community development program and approach in an integrated manner. It has been understood internationally as unique and very successful program and approach. No program of any other developing country has mobilized so much social, administrative and popular support, or brought about such a dramatic impact on community development and national integration as the Saemaul Undong of Korea.

At this point, it is desirable to draw several lessons from the experience of the

Saemaul Undong. Those might give meaningful implications to other countries. First, one of the factors to be pointed out is the package of government interventions and innovations. Government support for the Saemaul Undong was one of the most important factors of success. Some of them are as follows; the development of community organizations for greater people's participation, spiritual innovation for a self-help movement, people's motivation and commitment, facilitation of developmental roles of financial and other rural institutions, and nationwide mobilization of resources and support. Strong government interventions and support were a crucial factor of the success of the Saemaul Undong in the early stage.

Second, a particular attention should be given to the program of spiritual enlightenment which was in line with the human resource development endeavor through training and education. The so-called Saemaul Education may be considered one of the distinguished and unique features of the Saemaul Undong approach. It provided rural residents with not only basic and fundamental spiritual development, but also various technical knowledge and skills related to farming. Saemaul Education infused rural people with the development motivation and will, leading ultimately to changes in values, attitudes, and behaviors, conducive to fully active participation in Saemaul Undong.

Third, the Saemaul Undong has the characteristic of cooperative efforts for joint development and joint progress. It provided a ground for people to look for strong ties with other villagers under the concept of "we," instead of identifying themselves only as individual self. This attitude spread to the point where people would seek better living together at the community level. Although people's participation at the initial stage was largely by mobilization and enforcement through administrative channels of the government, it was evolved to the voluntary one as people realized the effect of the Saemaul Undong. For example, after the government encouraged the villagers to work together in the Foundation Building stage, much higher degree of cooperation and active participation of all the villagers were possible in carrying out income-generating activities in the self-help development stage and later.

Fourth, the step-by-step approach is considered one of the major reasons for the success of the Saemaul Undong. Many government-sponsored development projects failed in other developing countries, because the villagers were asked to do too much too fast.

In sum, the Saemaul Undong has been started with tangible and visible projects at the early stage and continue to emphasize the income generating projects. The approach manifests that the tangible material improvement and economic pay-offs must be obtained to motivate people's desire to change. Additionally it attempts simultaneously to change people's behavior inducing conscientization and cognitive attitude change toward shared values for community development.

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